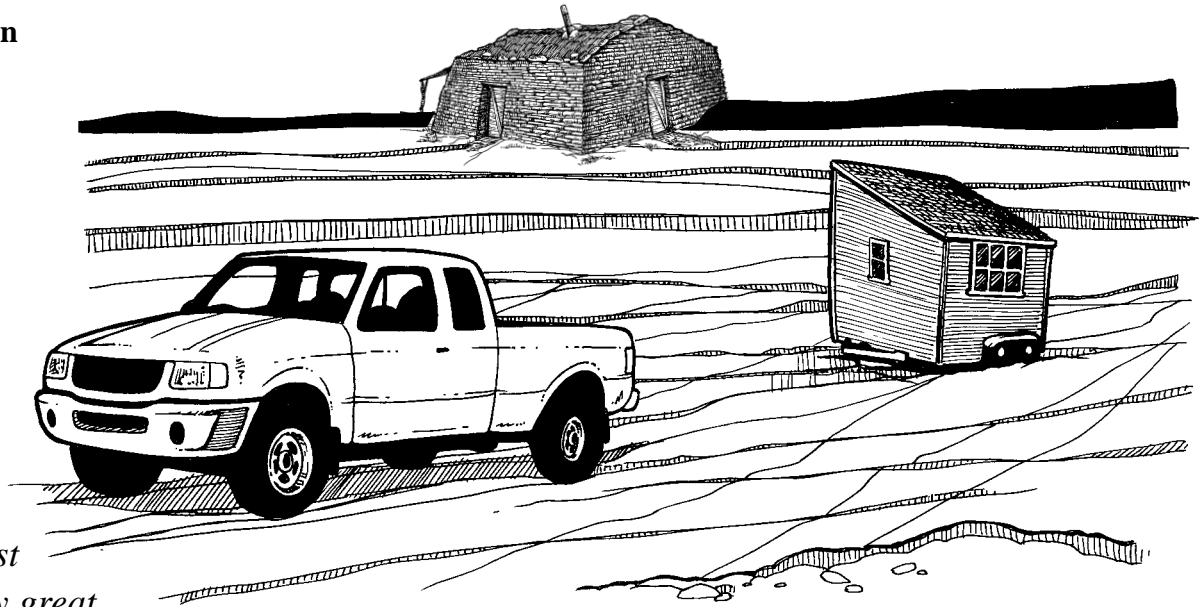


Homesteading in the New Millennium

By Greg Gullickson



I cannot even imagine how it must have been when my great grandfather Gullickson homesteaded on the prairies of North Dakota some 130

years ago. Or can I? My great grandfather homesteaded in what is now the Snake Creek Township of McLean County, but was then Dakota Territory. He traveled there by horse, staked his claim, farmed for a year, then went and got the rest of the family. Times were hard but the land proved to be fertile.

I can't imagine spending a winter on the barren prairie of North Dakota. Or can I? In a way I still find myself a homesteader every year when ice fishing rolls around or when setting up my tent on what seems to be uncharted ground on some remote shoreline of Lake Sakakawea.

In a way I feel a lot of us that are lovers of the outdoors are homesteaders. Like my great grandfather I still stake my claim early in the year on the ice. Usually walking out with just a bucket of rods onto the thickening ice. Then if times are good, as the ice gets stronger, I venture out with the pickup and the 4x8 portable house. If the fishing isn't good I move until I find fertile waters. I am sure that my great grandfather explored his options and did extensive work before finally settling on a place to build the sod house.

When I stake my claim in fertile waters I call my family, friends, and move the permanent shack out. There we enjoy reaping the benefits of the good earth. In many ways I find it similar to the way my great grandfather settled himself on the land. Travel light until you find a suitable location to setup your operation, test the waters and throw up shelter.

Like my great grandfather we gather on Friday and Saturday nights in my homestead shack to play cards and enjoy the company of the friends, relatives and neighbors. Often we talk about the crop, which in our case is fish. We discuss the weather, tell jokes and stories. Instead of badmouthing the government for not giving us fair prices for our crops we complain about not enough big walleyes in the lake.

I feel fortunate to know almost exactly where my great grandfather homesteaded. In fact his claim was less than a mile from the water on what is now the north arm of Lake Audubon. Maybe he chose that site partially because of the wildlife resources that were there. There were probably fish in Snake Creek and wild game for table fare. Many people still till the land and utilize the wildlife resources of the area. I have been on Lake Audubon in the dead of winter no more than a mile

from where the homestead was located. The homestead has been reduced to a rock pile now but by being out there in the fish house, staking my claim and feeling the icy chill of the northwest wind off the prairie, I feel closer to my relatives and the way the land was settled.

Like the Homestead Act, there are rules and regulations on how much area you can claim and how close your neighbors can get to your claim. Fish houses can have no more than 144 square feet in contact with the ice and can be no closer than 50 feet to one another.

I wonder if early homesteaders were as secretive about their farming practices as ice-fishing homesteaders are now. Perhaps we all need to share more of our farming secrets so everyone can enjoy a bountiful harvest. So this winter, go out and stake your claim and be resourceful on the lakes. Just remember to leave some seed for next year.

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